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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BAMAKO 000135

SIPDIS

RABAT FOR DAVID ARCHEY

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [ML](#)

SUBJECT: (S) TUAREGS LOOKING TO ARREST KIDNAPPING SUSPECTS;
SHOULD OTHERS DO THE SAME?

REF: A. BAMAKO 00106
[1](#)B. BAMAKO 00052
[1](#)C. BAMAKO 00063

Classified By: Ambassador Gillian Milovanovic for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

1.(S) Summary: Kidal Chamber of Commerce president Abdousalam ag Assalat and Tessalit based trafficker Merzouk ag Acherif contacted the Embassy on February 26 to provide further information on individuals they suspect of kidnapping two Canadian diplomats in December in Niger and four European tourists near the Malian town of Anderamboukane in January. Ag Assalat and Merzouk said they each learned of Alassane oul Mohamed's (aka "Cheibani") alleged involvement in the Canadian case independently from different sources. Cheibani is the primary suspect in the December 2000 murder of Defense Department civilian employee William Bultemeier (Ref. A). They also provided the name of the third individual suspected of playing a role in the kidnappings of the four European tourists - this individual was previously identified only as "Mohamed" but is now believed to be Mahama ag Assarid, a Chamanamas Tuareg from the Menaka area. Ag Assalat and Merzouk said a group of Kidal Tuaregs was working on a plan to capture several of the Malian traffickers so far linked to the kidnappings. It was unclear whether Tuaregs were coordinating on this scheme with Malian authorities. Ag Assalat and Merzouk claimed that negotiations for the Canadian diplomats were progressing but warned that "many more hostages will be taken" if the Canadians or Europeans delivered a ransom payment to AQIM. Merzouk also said AQIM had a long standing policy to unleash suicide attacks against Malian and western interests in Mali if the Malians or others took military action against AQIM positions in northern Mali. We briefly discussed the arrest of a foreign Islamic preacher in Anderamboukane and the still unknown whereabouts of Tuareg rebel leader Ibrahim Bahanga.

2.(S) Summary Continued: Tuareg plans to perform what seemingly resembles a northern Malian citizen's arrest raises questions about why others have not formally asked Mali to arrest those suspected of being involved in the Canadian and European kidnappings. Prior to news of Chieibani's alleged involvement, this remained a Canadian and European decision. On March 3 British officials here in Bamako told the Embassy that they had not previously considered asking Mali to arrest those allegedly involved in the European kidnappings, but indicated that the British team would begin discussing this now. On With Cheibani back on our radar screen, it is now

something we should consider as well. On March 2 the Malian Minister of Justice told the Ambassador that if the U.S. had information regarding Cheibani's whereabouts, Mali would act rapidly to bring him back into custody. End Summary.

Canadian Kidnapping Suspects

3.(S) The Embassy met with Abdousalam ag Assalat and Merzouk ag Acherif on February 26 in Bamako. Ag Assalat was in Bamako for meetings with the Malian Chamber of Commerce. Merzouk is a well-known "economic operator" and probable smuggler who was linked to some attacks on Malian military forces near Tessalit in 2007. He apparently tagged along with ag Assalat from Tessalit to visit family members in the Malian capitol. The fact that Merzouk is in Bamako at all, circulating freely, is notable and suggests that he may have some meetings with Malian officials of which we are unaware.

4.(S) As often occurs during meetings with Tuaregs from Kidal, both ag Assalat and Merzouk juggled several GSM and satellite telephones during the course of our discussion. Ag Assalat and Merzouk told the Embassy they learned of Cheibani's alleged involvement in the December 2008 kidnappings of the Canadian diplomats independently from different sources. Ag Assalat said he learned of Cheibani's role from a Malian Arab contact living in Menaka. He did not share the name of this individual. Merzouk said he first heard of Cheibani's involvement directly from Asultan ould Badi, a half-Arab half-Tuareg Malian AQIM facilitator. Both

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ag Assalat and Merzouk said they knew of a third individual, whom they described simply as a "cousin", who had heard of Cheibani's involvement from yet another source. Asultan ould Badi has also been linked to the Canadian kidnappings. Ag Assalat said he was convinced that Asultan was involved due, in large part, to recent behavior ag Assalat described as unusual. This includes Asultan's systematic changing of telephone numbers and what ag Assalat described as a concerted effort to lie low.

European Kidnapping Suspects

5.(S) In the days following the January 22 kidnappings of four European tourists near the Malian town of Anderamboukane, Tuaregs relayed the names of three Tuareg traffickers reportedly seen with the Europeans at a well on January 23. These included Inteweka ag Ahmayed (aka Ousmane), Tibla ag Tinfane, and an individual known only as Mohamed (Refs. B and C). On February 26 Merzouk said the third individual was actually named Mahama ag Assarid and is a Chamanamas Tuareg trafficker from the Menaka area. Ag Assalat added that ag Assarid had called an associate in Bamako just days after the Europeans' kidnapping to order an unusual quantity of weapons. Ag Assarid reportedly justified the request by stating that he was expecting to receive a large amount of money over the next few days.

A Tuareg Citizens' Arrest?

6.(S) Merzouk and ag Assalat said several Kidal based Tuaregs were in the process of hatching a plan to arrest Asultan ould Badi, the Tamanrasset based Inteweka ag Ahmayed, and perhaps Asultan's brother Man. It was not clear whether this plan also involved the capture of Tibla ag Tinfane, Cheibani, and ag Assarid. Neither Merzouk nor ag Assalat were comfortable providing details, although the plan seemed closer to a sting operation than a raid. Merzouk and ag Assalat were also vague on whether this plan entailed the involvement of Malian officials.

AQIM Negotiations and Threats

7.(S) Merzouk and ag Assalat said they believed negotiations for the release of the two Canadian diplomats were progressing rapidly through two intermediaries: National Assembly Deputy Ibrahim ag Mohamed Assalah and Almoustrat Mayor Baba ould Chouakh (or ould Shaykh). Ag Assalat said he believed negotiations could be concluded shortly - a perspective which may be somewhat overly optimistic in light of conversations with our Canadian colleagues, although on March 2 one Canadian described the liberation effort as entering the "end game" phase. Merzouk and ag Assalat said they had been approached by an unnamed individual - the same person who was providing updates on ag Assalah and ould Shaykh's dealings - to ask whether they would be interested in serving as an impartial go between for the European hostages. Merzouk and ag Assalat said they declined this offer as they preferred not to be involved in anything involving AQIM. Both warned that any ransom payment, by either the Canadians or the Europeans, would spark a whole new wave of kidnappings orchestrated by Tuareg and Arab traffickers looking to turn a quick profit.

8.(S) Using ag Assalat to translate from Tamacheck into French, Merzouk also discussed what he described as a long-standing AQIM plan to unleash suicide attackers - translated by ag Assalat as "kamikazes" - to hit Malian and Western interests, including American interests, in Bamako and elsewhere within Mali were Mali or any other nation to attack AQIM's camps in northern Mali. Ag Assalat said that AQIM's firepower was actually quite limited but that no one, specifically Mali, Algeria or the U.S., was concerned enough to commit the forces needed to remove AQIM from Malian soil. Merzouk said that local Tuaregs could do this if they were

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only better organized and equipped.

Arrested Islamic Preacher

9.(C) On February 24 local media reported the arrest of an Islamic preacher around Anderamboukane. Ag Assalat and Merzouk said the individual was of Asian origin, but not Pakistani, and that he was known for inciting violence and preaching militant Islam. Ag Assalat wondered if the individual had been transported to Bamako. Both said they did not believe the individual had any connection to the Canadian and European kidnappings.

Anyone Seen Bahanga?

10.(C) Ag Assalat and Merzouk both said the Tuareg rebellion was over, for now, and that the disarmament of various Tuareg rebel factions was indeed sincere. Merzouk said he could not confirm Bahanga's whereabouts, that Bahanga may be in Libya as reported by French media outlets, or he could be in Niger, or Chad, or still someplace in northern Mali. Ag Assalat said Bahanga was still traveling around with a few of his most trusted lieutenants.

Comment: Better Late Than Never?

11.(S) In reviewing the files from the Bultemeier murder case, it is clear that Malian security forces have the ability to act quickly and effectively when so inclined. According to the US Diplomatic Security investigation report on the Bultemeier murder, the Nigerien government sent a

general alert regarding Mr. Bultemeier's stolen vehicle to roadway checkpoints within 25 minutes of the shooting, enabling Republican Guard members in the northern Nigerien town of Tillaberi to give chase, albeit briefly, to the perpetrators and the stolen car. Border posts on the Malian side of the frontier were notified within 3 hours of the shooting, in time to stop the stolen vehicle had the assailants stuck to established roads. Later that same day, Nigerien gendarmes identified vehicle tracks near Ayorou, just south of the Malian border. This find enabled Nigerien and Malian security forces to effectively retrace the assailants' path into Mali by working with locals who observed the passing vehicle. According to the DS report, coordination with Nigerien and Malian officials ranged from the presidencies in Niamey and Bamako down to local camel herders. Malian authorities followed Mr. Bultemeier's vehicle as it was sold and resold from Gao to Timbuktu. Names of the alleged assailants, including Cheibani, were provided by Nigerien officials, who passed them to the U.S, which in turn passed them to the Malians. Close coordination between U.S., Nigerien, and Malian officials at multiple levels enabled Mali to arrest Cheibani and others on December 27, 2000, four days after Mr. Bultemeier's murder.

12.(S) In addition to providing a successful model for inter-government cooperation on a security issue in the Sahel, the Bultemeier files also offer an interesting point of comparison when one considers the evident lack of any mobilization, at least on the Malian side, following the December 2008 and January 2009 disappearances of the Canadian diplomats and European tourists. While an attempt to arrest those suspected of being involved in the Canadian and European kidnappings will do little to help the individuals now in the hands of AQIM, it could have other important benefits. The successful apprehension of kidnapping suspects will send a clear message to other would-be kidnappers that capturing westerners and selling them off to AQIM for cash is not as easy as it seems and could prove hazardous to one's long term well-being. Ag Assalat and Merzouk's warning of copy cat kidnappers is serious as there are currently few evident disincentives - beyond the moral ones to which individuals who fall into this category are not bound - for those contemplating the capture of more westerners for

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resale. Capturing some of those suspected of orchestrating the Canadian and European kidnappings may lead some potential copy cat kidnappers to think twice. On March 3 we asked British representatives currently in Bamako if the U.K. had any plans to request the arrest of those suspected of being involved in the European kidnappings. The British stated that this idea had not previously occurred to them but that it was something they would now discuss, particularly in light of the potential disincentives it could have for future kidnappers.

13.(S) Given the potential involvement of at least one individual - Cheibani - in the Canadian case, it could also provide a means for restarting the Bultemeier murder inquiry which has been stalled since Cheibani escaped from Malian custody in April 2002. On March 2 Minister of Justice Maharafa Traore told the Ambassador that the Bultemeier case remained open, and the warrant for Cheibani's arrest valid. Minister Traore added that if the Embassy had any clues regarding Cheibani's current whereabouts and could let the Malians know, Mali would move to capture Cheibani immediately. Presumably this also holds for other persons of interest who have been implicated in the Canadian and European kidnappings.

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